

I'M GONNA MAKE YOU LOVE ME?

"Tax haven", "the richest country in the world", "too small to be attractive", "provincial" were the slogans used on an invitation to a major round table which discussed the theme "Luxembourg Seen from Abroad." Around 300 packed into the Chamber of Commerce on 29th February to hear that the country wants to be liked and respected but that there are no short cuts to achieving this end. So which way forward?



Marcel Goeres, president of Goeres group; Georges Lentz, managing director Brasserie Nationale; Martine Schommer, Luxembourg ambassador to Germany; Serge Tonnar, musician/actor and president of the Luxembourg Federation of Professional Theatre; Philippe Depoorter, of the Banque de Luxembourg and head to the ABBL's "Welcome to Luxembourg" working group; Jürgen Stold, public relations professional

The Nation Brands Index was conducted last year in 50 countries by the consultants Gfk Roper. Apparently Luxembourg is less well known than Singapore and is liked about as much as Belgium. Also, people that know Luxembourg more seem to like it more. "Countries are judged by what they do and what they make, not by what they say about themselves" said the report.

PRIDE IN FINANCE

As at least 40% of national wealth is created by finance, the perception of many critics is that this wealth comes largely from helping rich people and companies avoid taxes. Philippe Depoorter of the Banque de Luxembourg is also head of the ABBL's "Welcome to Luxembourg" working group. He admitted that some practices in the past had been excessive but now "the tax haven image is 15-20 years out of date." Jealousy and scapegoating are also factors, he said.

"We should be proud of our internationally known fund industry," he said adding that "private banking is not driven by secrecy." He also argued that tax niches were created by others' tax systems, not Luxembourg's. Debate

moderator Jürgen Stold pointed out that some believe that bad publicity about Luxembourg works to the financial sector's advantage.

MORE THAN BANKS

"I don't care about the image of the financial sector," said musician/actor/arts administrator Serge Tonnar, "we are more than that." He lamented the lack of knowledge of national culture about which people could be proud. The country's manufacturing capacity should be highlighted, reminded Georges Lentz, managing director Brasserie Nationale. Steel, satellites, beer... all contribute to the country's self image and public face, he said.

The panel agreed that the most barbed comments generally come from French media and politicians, with German opinions being more measured. Although unfair, inaccurate criticism should be countered, the panel agreed, there is no need to over react. Depoorter pointed out that: "An article in Le Figero or Le Monde may hurt but these may be read by 100,000 people. We have to react but in a positive, non-defensive fashion." Lentz added that in the same way that Parisian-based media often look down on provincial France, so

"eastern" Luxembourg suffers from this scornful attitude.

SELF IMAGE MAKE PUBLIC IMAGE

So how to turn the image around? Tonnar suggested a new "Luxembourg for Culture" body would have more impact than selling the "not very sexy" financial sector. Hotel owner Marcel Goeres said tourism had a beneficial effect in giving visitors a more rounded picture. "Léa Linster is a perfect ambassador and she brings many people here from Germany," he said.

However, the size of the task was illustrated by Martine Schommer the ambassador to Germany. "We are known in Germany," she said "but superficially. "Sometimes it is better, in countries like China, when people have no idea about us then they can be open minded. That said, there is a quantative problem..."

Tonnar thinks the solution lies in the country having a clearer self image. "We say 'we want to remain what we are' but we don't know what we are. We need to understand what we are and what we want to sell, and then cultivate that."

Text: Stephen Evans